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ABSTRACT

One of a series of work-based interviews about occupations in Australia, this booklet presents a personal interview with a self-employed plumber about his job. The following questions are answered: what the plumber does, why the person chose the field of employment, how the person got the job, what he does and doesn't like about it, what kind of training was needed, what the plumber does during a working week, his co-workers, the hours, and how the work contributes to society. Cartoons are used to enliven the material, and a glossary listing words is included. Although designed to be used in literacy classes with adult new readers, the booklets are also appropriate for use with elementary and secondary students in career exploration and career education. (KC)

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Hazel Edwards'

Workdays

a day in the life of ...

a Plumber

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a day in the life of ....

a Plumber

Name Michael Gardner

Aged 26

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WHAT DOES WORK MEAN TO YOU?

Plumbers' work isn't seen. It's hidden in walls or under floors so the satisfaction has to be personal, that I've done a good job. *Basically*, work means making enough money to live on.

WHAT IS PLUMBING LIKE?

Plumbing is dirty, hard work, but it's enjoyable.

WHAT KIND OF PLUMBING DO YOU DO?

It doesn't worry me what type of plumbing. I'll do anything; installing central heaters or *evaporative* air conditioners, sewers, spouting, water renewals, gas lines or boilers. Plumbing is *seasonal*.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY SEASONAL?

In winter, there's a lot of heating, in summer there's cooling, spouting and water renewals because people don't have enough water pressure.

DO PEOPLE KNOW WHAT PLUMBERS DO?

A lot of people don't know what plumbers do. Most people think we do sewers only.

ARE PLUMBERS NECESSARY?

You have to have plumbers, they're a *necessity*.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THIS OCCUPATION?

Dad was a plumber and offered *apprenticeships* to my brother and me. He wanted to make sure we had a good job.

DID YOUR FATHER NEED YOUR HELP?

He could have done without us and he had to take on extra work for the three of us, but he made the offer. Dad said if I wanted to do plumbing, I was welcome to the job. If not, I could have stayed at school or started something else.

DID YOU WANT TO DO SOMETHING ELSE?

I didn't really know what I wanted to do, and the career teacher suggested I take the *opportunity* my father was offering.

WAS YOUR FATHER ALWAYS IN THE TRADE?

Dad did an adult apprenticeship in eighteen months with my uncle who was a plumber too.

WHAT WAS YOUR DAD'S JOB BEFORE HE BECAME A PLUMBER?

Previously Dad had been a labourer.

WHAT SCHOOL DID YOU GO TO TO LEARN YOUR TRADE?

I went to a *tech.* because it was always considered I'd go into a trade of some sort and I'm good with my hands. I'm more suited to the trades than academic work.

WHAT SUBJECTS DID YOU PREFER?

Metalwork, fitting and machinery were my favourite school subjects. I'm better with my hands than my head.

DO YOU STILL WORK TOGETHER?

Now we occasionally work together if there's too much work for one, but we've got separate businesses.

WHAT SKILLS OR TRAINING DOES A PLUMBER NEED?

A four year apprenticeship and *commonsense*. Basic *bookkeeping* skills are necessary. With any trade it's commonsense. If you sit down, you can usually work anything out.

WHAT ABOUT THE PAPERWORK?

Paperwork is different. I don't like the paperwork.

WHO DOES THE PAPERWORK?

Lyn, my wife does that. I work out the *qwotes* and she writes them down. I write the bills and she looks after the bookkeeping.

Plumber's paperwork.

DID YOUR FATHER LIKE THE PAPERWORK?

Dad used to sit down once a month to do his paperwork. He hated paperwork too.

DO YOU NEED GOOD COMMUNICATION SKILLS?

You do need to be able to talk to people.

HOW DO YOU FIND WORK?

When most people call a plumber they want something done, so you don't need to be a salesman. If you can find the problem and point out what needs to be done, you'll get the job if you're *reasonably* priced.

DO YOU NEED TO BE STRONG TO BE A PLUMBER?

Physical size does make a difference in plumbing. But bigger blokes take on only certain types of work.

WHY?

They don't want to be stuck under a house. So you can pick and choose jobs.

ARE THERE FEMALE PLUMBERS?

There are female plumbers too, but not many.

WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THAT YOUR DAUGHTER BE A PLUMBER?

If she wanted to be. There are women plumbers around, and they need the same qualities.

DO YOU START EARLY?

I start early and finish early. In summer I'm on the job by 7 o'clock and don't have lunch or *smoko*, so I'm home by 4 o'clock.

WHAT ABOUT MEAL BREAKS?

Usually I eat my lunch on the way home.

WHY DO YOU EAT ON THE WAY HOME?

It's the way Dad always worked. You booked in a day's work and when it was finished, you knocked off even if it was 12 o'clock. If you ran, you finished early.

DO YOU WORK LONG HOURS?

I like to be knocked off by 3.30pm, but it depends on the job. Sometimes you have to finish off sections. Last week I didn't finish until 6.30 or 7.00pm.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO DURING A TYPICAL WEEK?

Last Thursday I was at a new printing factory in Kilsyth. He wanted me to put in

an extra toilet and hand basin and for me to move a kitchen sink. So I did that.
Went back tonight to give him the forms for the final inspection. It should pass.

Friday I finished off a sewer.

Tuesday and Wednesday I did *spouting* and *downpipes* in a house two doors down. In the middle of the day I had to pick up a bar sink for a carpenter and drop it off at a job where I'll be fitting tomorrow because he needed to know what size it was. Then I went to the local *Council* to get information for a quote but went to the wrong council, so I had to go back. Then I fitted a spa in the afternoon.

Tonight, I'll work on the quote.

DO YOU WORK WEEKENDS?

Most weekends I don't work, but occasionally something has to be done. In the last month I've worked both Saturday and Sunday for two weekends.

WHAT WILL YOU DO NEXT WEEK?

Next week, there's a carport which needs a roof, gutters and drains put on. A few more spouting jobs are lined up. Then there's a big *extension* job in Kew for a builder, but that may not be ready.

IS IT EASY TO GET WORK?

Many times I've gone to bed on Sunday night with no work for the next week. The phone will ring Monday morning and I'm off again.

DO YOU ADVERTISE YOURSELF?

Although I run an *ad* in the local newspaper and that brings in a few jobs, most is word of mouth.

Your Ad says you're the best at fixing leaks.. this Organisation has one big, ugly one it wants yooz ta fix !! 16

WHERE DO YOU DO THE MOST WORK?

The *majority* of my work comes from a couple of companies with whom I contract. Most companies have contractors rather than people on staff.

DO YOU CONTACT THEM?

If they're busy they'll ring me.

DOES IT HELP TO HAVE A GOOD REPUTATION?

Reputation is everything. Plumbing is a small world. It's hard to build a good name, but it's real easy to get a bad one.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF YOU DID BAD WORK?

I know a few plumbers who have done bad work. If you're out, you're out. They don't get any work.

DO YOU WORK LOCALLY?

Usually, there's a *radius* in which I travel but because of the economic climate, I'm having to *venture* further to get work.

DO YOU PREFER WORKING ALONE?

Mostly I work alone. Plumbing's not lonely work, you're always talking to someone. I prefer working by myself.

DO YOU EMPLOY OTHER PLUMBERS WHEN YOU ARE BUSY?

Occasionally, I employ a couple of blokes, but only 3 or 4 days per year.

HOW ARE THEY PAID?

They are paid on a flat daily rate or paid by the hour. Depends on the job.

HAVE YOU EVER WORKED FOR SOMEONE ELSE?

After I finished my apprenticeship I worked four years for another plumber. He had an apprentice who was no good. For four years I worried about his mistakes.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Every time something went wrong even though it wasn't my fault, because I was the plumber there, I got the blame. That worried me because I like to do a good job.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF SELF-EMPLOYMENT?

Self employment means you can work the hours you choose, but it does depend upon the customer and what's happening. There's no average. Sometimes it's very busy, sometimes not at all.

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE YOUR FRIEND'S WORK RELATED TO YOUR WORK?

90% of my friends are in a trade. Three or four are plumbers. Others are *electricians*. Most of my friends came from school or the *pub*. Not many from work, they are mainly *acquaintances*.

WHAT EQUIPMENT DO YOU NEED?

A truck. A general set of handtools in one tool box. These are the most used tools. A couple of shifters, a hammer and screw drivers. Oxy acetylene for welding and cutting. You have to 'make do'.

DO PLUMBERS HAVE THEIR OWN JARGON?

Each trade has a language. All the different fittings have *abbreviated* names. You might hear, 'Go to the truck and grab the Flunion'. Then there's 'Gooey Gum' a thread sealant

which is really called Tot but everybody calls it 'gooey gum'.

WHAT TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS HAVE HAPPENED IN YOUR WORK AREA?

Nothing *dramatic* in the eleven years I've been plumbing.

HOW DO YOU FIND OUT ABOUT NEW DEVELOPMENTS?

New fittings and new ways of doing things are usually *publicised* at the plumbing *suppliers*. Or I'll pick it up from another plumber who's used something new.

CAN YOU GIVE AN EXAMPLE?

Recently Vulcan (a company specialising in heaters) brought out a new heater and they had an *information* night. I went to that because I have to fit the new heaters.

WHAT KIND OF KNOWLEDGE DO YOU NEED?

You can't sell to customers if you don't know anything about the heaters. Because I haven't worked on new houses for some time, I had to go to the council to check on recent *regulations*.

ARE YOU RESPONSIBLE FOR THE COUNCIL STANDARDS?

You need a knowledge of council standards because you are responsible for that.

DO YOU WORK WITH OTHER TRADES?

I work with electricians and carpenters and pretty well every trade. But in bursts. If I was very busy doing coolers, I might do that for three months and see only electricians.

HOW MIGHT THINGS CHANGE AT YOUR WORKPLACE IN THE FUTURE?

Self regulation is being encouraged and they're trying to licence everybody in the plumbing industry to get rid of the unqualified people.

WHAT KIND OF LICENCES DO YOU NEED?

I have to have a plumber's licence and a contractor's licence.

HOW DO YOU GET A LICENCE?

Just a matter of filling out a form.

WHAT IS A LICENCE BASED ON?

The licence is based on being a tradesman in the industry for more than five years and a certain amount of money in the bank.

WHAT DOES THE LICENCE ALLOW YOU TO DO?

The contractor's licence enables you to employ people. Although I don't employ others, because my wife Lyn is in the business, I need a contractor's licence.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE BECAUSE OF SELF-REGULATION?

In the future, regulations will get easier. They're getting rid of the sewerage inspectors.

DO YOU SEE ANY PROBLEMS WITH SELF-REGULATION?

Corners might be cut in the future and that's not a good thing.

WHAT OTHER CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE IN THE FUTURE?

If I could get payment on completion it would make everything easier.

WHAT ABOUT SLOW PAYMENT?

Slow payment is a problem. I might be owed six thousand *dollars* and yet have nothing in the bank. Overdrawn on the *overdraft*.

DO YOU CHASE SLOW PAYERS?

You have to chase them up. But because I mainly work for companies I know, bad debts aren't really a problem.

DO YOU WORRY ABOUT THE JOBS YOU DO?

I worry too much and should get out of them quicker. It's got to be right or I'm not happy with it.

WHAT SATISFACTION DOES YOUR WORK OFFER?

A bathroom *renovation* gives the greatest satisfaction. Before and after. You walk in and they've got an old pink bath and a pink pedestal basin. You pull it all out, put in the new one and it looks terrific.

DO PLUMBERS MAKE A LOT OF MONEY?

Money is another matter. People have wrong ideas about how much plumbers earn.

WHAT KIND OF MONEY DO YOU EARN?

I charge thirty dollars per hour. But by the time I take out running costs and insurance there's not much left.

Ace Plumbing at your service Madam.

WHAT KIND OF INSURANCE DO YOU NEED?

I have to carry a million dollars worth of *insurance* in case I burn the customer's house down.

CAN YOU GET WORKCARE?

No workcare, so if I fall off a roof and break my leg I can't work. So, I carry sickness and accident insurance.

WHY NOT CHARGE MORE PER HOUR?

If I wanted more money, I'd charge more money. I'm happy with what I'm getting at the moment. Better than wages, but you don't set the world on fire.

ANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUILDING UP THE BUSINESS?

Opportunities exist for employing more people and building up the business. But I don't want to do that. I'm happy doing what I'm doing.

DO YOU ALWAYS WANT TO BE A PLUMBER?

Don't want to still be 'on the tools' after I'm 45.

HAVE ANY FUNNY THINGS HAPPENED?

When I was an apprentice. We were trying to unblock a sewer and we dug down about seven feet to clear it. My Dad and a mate were holding me by my feet and they were supposed to pull me up as it cleared. But they didn't. I had long hair, I was covered in everything.

IF YOU COULD START AGAIN, WOULD YOU CHOOSE THE SAME OCCUPATION?

Probably. Or maybe some other trade.

WHAT OTHER TRADE DO YOU HAVE IN MIND?

Electrician isn't a bad job. It's not as heavy and not as hard. But any job looks easier from the outside. A lot more technical things go on with electricians.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU HAVE FOR THOSE CONTEMPLATING YOUR AREA OF WORK?

Plumbing is a good job. Some plumbers are not the brightest but they've still got reasonable businesses. They can make a go of it fairly easily. All they have to do is decent work.

DO YOU NEED SPECIAL ABILITIES?

You need commonsense and the ability to get along fairly well with people. Be *versatile*. If you go to a job and they need a few tiles put on in the bathroom, the plumber can do that instead of calling in another tradesman.

WHAT IS AN APPRENTICESHIP LIKE?

The first year of an apprenticeship, you just follow the plumber around, picking up the bits and pieces. Takes a couple of years before you're any good. But it depends how quickly you learn. Plumbers are always needed.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT 'GOING ON THE DOLE'?

Only if I had to, because I was injured and had no insurance to keep my family, would I go on the *dole*.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT PEOPLE WHO WON'T WORK?

I think it's *crook* when there's work around and they go on the dole. I think they should be working. I pay my fair share of tax to support them.

WHAT ABOUT SICKIES?

Taking '*sickies*' is not a right. If you don't work you don't get paid. That's the way I work.

WHO CONTRIBUTES MOST IN OUR SOCIETY?

Everybody needs to do their bit. No one contributes more that the other.

GLOSSARY

basically	*simply*
evaporative	*to give off moisture*
seasonal	*could be Spring, Summer, Autumn or Winter weather*
necessity	*real need or a requirement*
apprenticeships	*a trade being learnt during a certain time, usually four years*
opportunity	*chance or opening*
tech	*Australian slang jargon for a trade school*
commonsense	*practical understanding*
bookkeeping	*recording of money (receipts or accounts)*
quotes	*stated or written prices*
reasonably	*sensibly*
physical	*to do with the human body*
smoko	*Australian slang jargon for a work break*
spouting	*attached open drain to catch rainwater from the roof*

GLOSSARY CONTINUED

downpipes	*pipes attached to spouts to run off rainwater*
Council	*Local Government*
extension	*addition*
ad	*Australian slang jargon for a newspaper advertisement*
majority	*most or greatest*
reputation	*opinion of a person*
radius	*certain area*
venture	*travel*
occasionally	*sometimes*
electricians	*qualified trade person to do electrical wiring*
pub	*Australian slang jargon for a Public Bar*
acquaintances	*someone you know slightly*
abbreviated	*shortened*
dramatic	*Australian slang jargon for unusual or exciting*
publicised	*advertised openly*
suppliers	*trading stores*

GLOSSARY CONTINUED

information	*content, knowledge or facts*
regulations	*set rules*
dollars	*Australian dollars*
overdraft	*bank credit account for a business*
renovation	*renewed or repaired work*
insurance	*a way of financial protection against accidents or faulty work*
versatile	*able to do different tasks easily*
dole	*a government payment to a person out of work*
crook	*Australian slang/jargon for wrong or not moral*
sickies	*Australian slang/jargon for a day off work due to (supposed) illness*

Hazel Edwards'

Workdays

a day in the life of ...

A collection of simply written, work-based interviews, to give an insight into others' workstyles for beginning adult readers. The subjects were chosen to cover a range of occupations and workplace situations in Australia including the self-employed, franchisee, professional, trade and semi-skilled.

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Workdays is based on real people in real jobs. The aim of the series is to provide simply written, interesting and relevant material for new readers.

Author Hazel Edwards' method of researching is by interview and visiting the workplace.

Her previous one hundred books have included adult literacy, scripts, non-fiction, crime and childrens books. Currently she is researching other workplaces for more books in the ' day in a life of ' series.

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the Chef	Customs Officer
Vet Nurse	Family Garage Owner
Computer Salesman	Fruiterer
Offshore Platform Worker	Plumber
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